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JAY:
NINJA OF LIGHTNING

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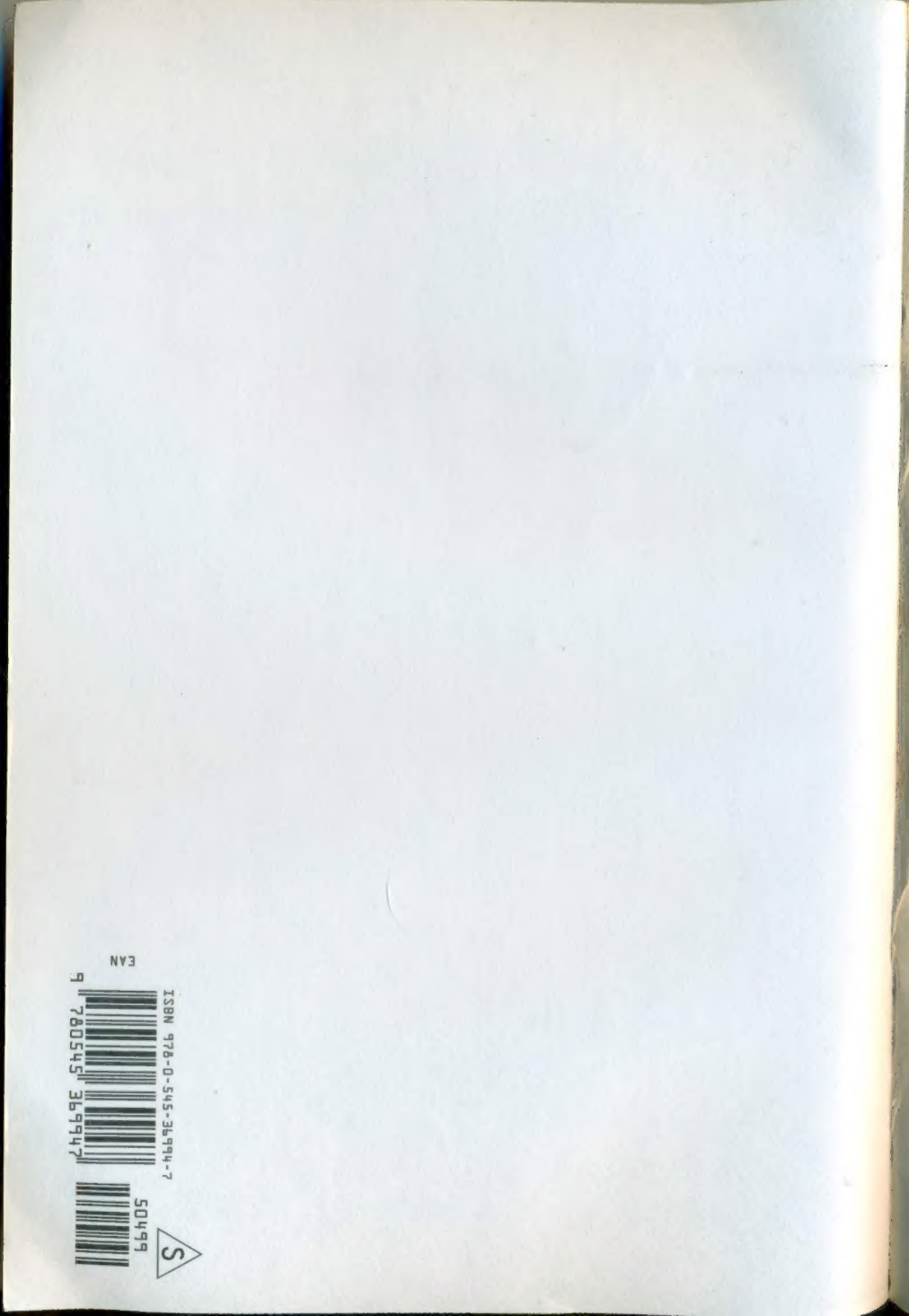

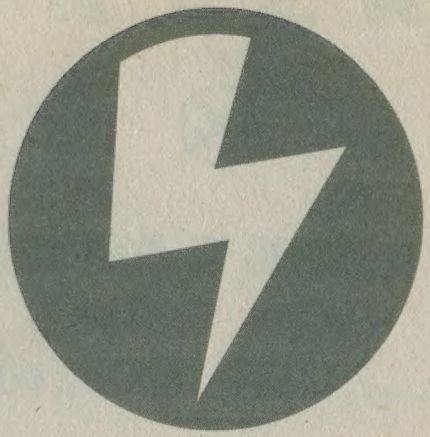

JAY: NINJA OF LIGHTNING

By Greg Farshtey

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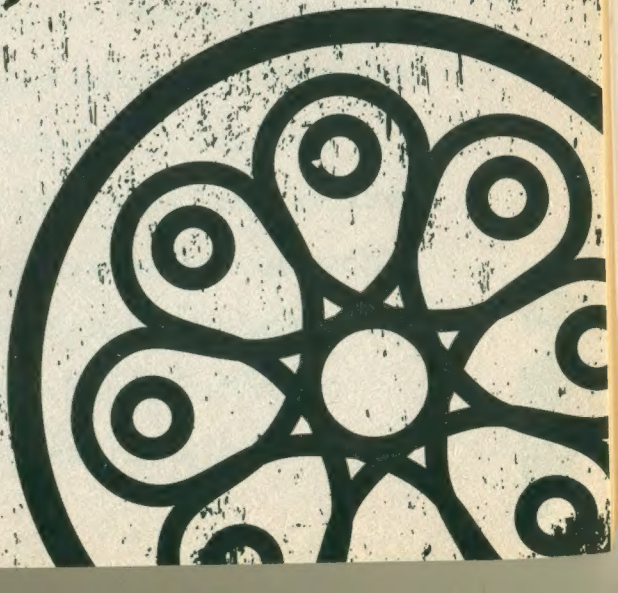
FROM THE JOURNAL OF

Sensei Wu



A team needs many things in order to succeed. Unity, strength, skill, intelligence — all of these play a part. But one thing that is often overlooked is the ability to smile in the face of danger. Heroes who can find humor in even the most terrifying situations are often the ones best able to survive.

I know this well. In my time, I encountered many adventurers who were serious every moment. Few of them proved to be successful for very long. A hero has to battle too many great evils — often only the ability

to laugh at life can keep him going.

That is one of the reasons Jay is such a valuable member of my team. He is always ready with a joke, even in the middle of a battle. His sense of humor sends a message to the others that everything will be all right, no matter what danger they may face together.

Jay is a young man of many talents. Along with being the Ninja of Lightning, he cooks and has created many inventions. He loves to talk, leading Cole to refer to him as the "mouth of lightning." He seems to truly enjoy life and to see his career as a ninja as an excuse for endless adventure.

I first met Jay when he was testing out one of his inventions, a pair of wooden wings with which he was attempting to fly. Needless to say, it did not end well. I had already calculated the mass of his invention, the direction and speed of the wind, and the speed he would need to successfully launch himself into the air. And so when his flight ended with him crashing into a billboard, I was waiting there for him.

Unlike Zane, who does not remember his past, Jay recalls it but does not wish to speak about it. I do not believe that he has some dark deed in his past that he is ashamed of. I think perhaps he came from humble beginnings and somehow believes that to be a cause for embarrassment. I cannot imagine why this would be so. A man, after all, is not measured by the wealth in his pocket but by the riches in his heart.

Of course, there is now the matter of his obvious attraction to Kai's sister, Nya. He may well wish her to believe his early life was an exciting one and the truth would be quite different. Still, if he truly cares for her, it would be best to be honest—for if she truly cares for him, she will accept him no

matter how poor he might once have been.

Jay will tell you he is a young man of many interests, but his true passion is inventing. He once told me that he has crates full of things he has created, some of which he can no longer recall the purpose of. Leave him alone for an hour with tools and raw materials, and there is no telling what you may find when you return.

The list of his inventions is long and certainly . . . unique. There is the machine that removes the core of every apple on a tree, before they are even picked; the material that can be written on as a document, or stretched to form a waterproof tent; a blanket designed to keep one cold on hot nights; and stilts that allow one to go from extremely tall to normal height at the touch of a button. (This last invention jammed on its first use, bouncing Jay between six feet and sixty feet high over one hundred times in two minutes. He said it took him a month to stop feeling dizzy.)

Still, all his creativity, humor, and enthusiasm would mean nothing if he was not also a skilled and brave fighter. Jay once took on an entire skeleton army in the Caves of Despair to buy his friends time. He did not hesitate to do so, although it put his life in terrible danger. For him, there simply was no question — if Zane, Kai, and Cole needed him, he would do whatever he had to in order to aid them.

Jay is truly a vital member of this team. I do not believe it could succeed without him, and I am not even certain it could exist without the qualities he possesses. Although he covers his feelings with jokes, I am sure he knows how proud his friends are to fight beside him.

THE DRAGON'S ROAR

Jay was not a happy ninja.

In the last half hour, the evil Samukai had finally stolen three of the Four Weapons of Spinjitzu; Sensei Wu had vanished over a lavafall with the fourth; and Jay and his friends were unable to pursue them because Samukai and the sensei were now both in the Underworld. Sensei Wu had counted on his new ninja to protect the Weapons from Samukai, and they had failed.

That was all bad enough. But then Kai suddenly appeared actually *riding* on a Fire Dragon. The great beasts, it seemed, were

the key to following Sensei Wu. Being not truly of this world or any other, the dragons had the power to travel between Ninjago and the Underworld. First, though, the ninja would have to master riding them.

Jay immediately sensed **disaster**. He saw only one way out. "Um, Kai, since yours is already taking passengers, why can't we all ride on it?"

Kai shook his head. "Each dragon will only carry the rider connected to its element; at least, that's what the legends all say. So we each have to ride our own."

"I see two minor problems," said Zane. "First, we know nothing about riding dragons. Second, there are no dragons to ride."

"If that's what you see as 'minor' problems, I'd hate to see your idea of 'major' ones," said Jay.

"Whichever, we better find a way to solve them if we want to find the sensei and get those Weapons back from Samukai,"

said Cole. "We let ourselves be tricked. Now we have **to make things right**."

Kai patted his dragon's scaly neck. "I think this big fellow here can provide one answer, can't you, boy?"

As if in answer, the dragon lifted its massive head and let out a long, low roar that seemed to last forever. This was followed by . . . nothing. The ninja stood around uncomfortably, not wanting to question Kai's judgment. Then they heard it—answering cries coming from the north, south, and west.

Cole pointed toward the sky. "Look! Look up there!"

High above, three great dragons were circling. The Ice Dragon was the first to land, followed by the Lightning Dragon and the Earth Dragon. They seemed to look at the Fire Dragon expectantly, as if to say, "Yes, what is it you wanted?" After a moment, they looked like they were going to fly off. The

Fire Dragon growled loudly, and the other three immediately settled down.

"All right," said Kai. "Let's go."

"Wait just a second," said Jay. "How did you manage to get a dragon to let you ride it? I doubt it just let you climb aboard, unless it was looking for a potential snack on the go."

Kai shrugged. "Well, I just explained to it what the problem was . . . and it wanted to help. If Garmadon is threatening the world, it's the dragons' world, too, at least some of the time."

Jay had to admit that made sense, in a strange sort of way. Zane and Cole went right to work trying to persuade their dragons to help them. Jay's dragon looked at the ninja through narrowed eyes, as if daring him to try to be convincing.

"Right. Here goes," Jay said to himself. Meeting the dragon's gaze, he said, "Listen, there's this guy, Garmadon, and he wants to get his hands on some really powerful weapons—stuff that could even singe your scales. So you might want to, I don't know, help stop him."

At first, the dragon did not react at all. Then it took a deep breath and exhaled, lightning bolts shooting from its mouth. "**Yiiii!**" shouted Jay, barely avoiding being fried by dragon breath.

The dragon smiled and closed its eyes.

I should have known, thought Jay. *Each of us has a different talent, and Kai's is his energy and enthusiasm. He could probably talk Garmadon into giving up, if he had the chance. Zane will just make a really logical argument to the dragon until it has to give in. But me? I'll have to do this a different way.*

Jay sat down on a hillside across from the sleeping dragon and thought about what he was good at. The first thing that came to mind was making jokes. Jay had a great sense of humor and always tried to keep his friends laughing. Maybe the dragon could

use a laugh, too. *If I smelled like that, I sure could*, thought Jay.

"Hey, dragon!" Jay said loudly. The dragon opened one eye. "How can you tell if you have a dragon in your bathroom? The door won't close! How long was the dragon's vacation? Four days and three knights! How about this one? Three ninja and a dragon walk into a dojo, and—"

The Lightning Dragon swiped its **massive tail**, knocking Jay off his feet.

"That's the worst thing about dragons," muttered Jay, standing back up. "They don't know good jokes when they hear them."

Jay went back to thinking. What else was he good at? Well, he was a pretty good cook. Even the sensei seemed to like what he made over the campfire. Maybe he could make a tasty dish for the dragon.

Looking around, Jay was able to find many things for his recipe, including fruit, nuts, and various plants he knew were safe to eat. (Giving the dragon a poisonous plant for lunch would have been a very bad idea, after all.) He mixed them all together into a huge salad and used juice from the rillberry plant for a dressing. Then he placed the whole thing in front of the dragon's nose.

One eye half opened, and the dragon peered at the meal. It took a long sniff. When it breathed out, its electric power turned the food to ash. Then it went back to sleep.

"I'll take that as a no," Jay grumbled.

"You made a salad for a dragon?" Kai asked, in disbelief.

"What's wrong with that?" said Jay. "Why, what do dragons eat?"

"Well . . . ninja," said Kai, smiling, "especially ones who serve salads."

By this time, Jay was getting discouraged. Zane was already sitting on his dragon and Kai had his practically purring. Jay did not want to wind up being left behind just

because of an uncooperative dragon.

Think! he said to himself. *There must be something you haven't tried.*

Jay had one other talent, although not everyone called it that. He was an inventor, constantly tinkering with new gadgets and testing them out. Some of them didn't work and some of them weren't very useful, but he got a lot of satisfaction out of coming up with the ideas and putting them together. Maybe he could invent something the dragon would like.

But what would a dragon need, he wondered? It already had strength, the power of flight, natural armor, claws, and in this case, the ability to breathe lightning bolts. What would make its life better?

Then he remembered the Fire Dragon's roar. What if how loud the roar was determined which dragon was listened to? What if he could give the Lightning Dragon

the loudest roar?

Jay hurried off to the cart and returned with an armful of tools and a bunch of odds and ends. He immediately set to work building a funnel-shaped device which, when spoken into, would make the sound much louder. That was nothing new, of course, but what made it unique was that it was designed to fit inside a dragon's mouth without interfering with the beast's ability to bite and chew. It wasn't perfect, he knew—after all, it was not like he was able to measure the dragon's teeth. But if it worked, he could always modify it later.

When Jay was finished, he found he faced one more problem: getting the dragon to open its mouth long enough for him to put it in. The only thing he could think of was to make the dragon so angry that it opened up to breathe more lightning at him. And that was easy to do—he just made another salad.

This time, the smell of the rillberry dressing made the dragon even more irritated. It opened its vast jaws and prepared to add some sizzle to the recipe. As soon as Jay saw its mouth gaping wide, he rushed forward and put his invention into place. He was finished not a second too soon as the angry dragon slammed its mouth shut and almost caught Jay.

"ROOOOAAAARRRR," said the dragon, so loudly that Jay was knocked over. The other dragons whipped their heads around in shock and it seemed like the mountains shook all around. The dragon roared a few more times, but with less fury and more a sense of celebration.

"So, what do you think?" said Jay, back on his feet again. "Nobody's going to push you around again."

The dragon gave a low rumble of satisfaction that shook the ground. Then it lowered its great head and allowed Jay to climb onto its neck. Jay couldn't help grinning as he turned to his friends.

"What are we waiting for?" he said. "We have dragons to ride!"

THE TRUTH-SEEKER

CHAPTER 1

Jay and Kai rode into the village on two mules. Their friend Zane would have said this was a most undignified way for ninja to travel. It was certainly true that one couldn't be particularly stealthy when riding an animal that was clumsy and loud. But Jay was more than happy for the company, especially since it was a long ride to the village.

It was almost the end of the day. The trip to the village had taken the ninja longer than expected. There were skeletons in the hills and bandits along the road. The ones the ninja couldn't evade, they'd had to fight. It

meant a few scratches here and there, but nothing more serious than that.

Up ahead, Jay saw their destination: Lee's Supplies, the only general store for miles around. The ninja would be breaking camp and moving on in a couple of days, and basic goods—food, blankets, whetstones for sharpening swords—were in short supply. Jay and Kai had been sent to purchase what the team needed, pack it on the mules, and haul it back to camp. Normally, it was a job for one ninja, but the presence of **skeletons and bandits** led Sensei Wu to send them both. Kai wasn't thrilled about going on a shopping trip and had complained loudly about the job.

Lee, a short, chubby man with a fringe of black hair, was just locking up his shop as the ninja approached. "Hi," said Jay. "My friend and I have come a long way to buy some goods. We have mules, so you can see we're planning on making some serious purchases. Is there still time to get them today?"

The shopkeeper turned. At the sight of two ninja on their mules, he seemed unsure whether to run or burst out laughing. "Um, well . . . um . . . the shop is closed. I'll be open again at nine tomorrow morning."

"What?" snapped Kai. "It's not even sundown. What kind of a shop are you running here?"

"What my friend is trying to say," Jay cut in, "is that we would really appreciate it if you would stay open for a little bit longer so we can get what we need. A long trip here means a long trip back—the two usually go together, you know."

Lee emphatically shook his head. "No. My dinner is waiting. Besides, you're ninja, aren't you? How do I know you won't take my goods and not pay me?"

"Why, you—" Kai said hotly. "We're out there day after day **fighting skeletons** to protect folks like you."

"Skeletons?" Lee said. He seemed startled. "Well, you won't find any of those around here. This visit is a waste of your time," he said quickly.

Jay frowned. He thought everyone knew there were skeletons in the area. How had the shopkeeper missed that bit of news? Still, arguing with him was pointless. He might decide to sell them nothing at all.

"All right," said Jay. "We'll come back in the morning. Is there an inn we can stay at overnight?"

Lee shrugged. "This is a small village. The inn is right down the street."

Jay thanked him and went over to the inn with Kai. After making sure the mules were fed and quartered in the local stable, they got rooms. Dinner at the inn was some thin soup and a hunk of old bread. Jay knew he could make better food in his sleep. In fact, he had done so once while he was sleepwalking, which hadn't amused the sensei very much.

"What brings you here, strangers?" asked Mrs. Park, the innkeeper.

"We're in town to buy some supplies from Mr. Lee," Jay replied. "Although it seems that finding Sensei Wu's phantom teapot might be an easier task," he whispered to Kai.

"Ha!" said Mrs. Park. She was sitting in a corner knitting a red and blue scarf, apparently not interested in eating her own cooking. "Watch your money, I say. Lee is a cheat. He sells bags of flour that are half full, bread long past when it's good, nails that break when you pound on them, and axes whose heads fly off at the first chop. I had to spend so much money to replace all the things I bought from him that I almost went out of business . . . I might, still."

"I'm a trader," said Din, a young man with a shock of red hair on his head. "I carry goods from place to place. Lee buys from me and promises to pay the next time I come through the village. By the time I come back again, he has sold what he has bought from me—then claims he never purchased it and owes me nothing!"

A grizzled older man in the corner, named Lu, joined the conversation. "You complain about a raindrop in the middle of a flood. Yes, Lee is a thief and a liar. But he is not the only one in this village. He has told me many stories, and were others to hear them, there would be much trouble for someone."

"What kind of stories?" asked Kai.

The old man just shook his head. "That is not for outsiders to know. We deal with our own problems here."

You don't seem to be doing it very well, thought Kai.

"Besides," the man continued, "you would seem to have problems of your own. Half the village saw you two arguing with Lee today."

"That was a misunderstanding," Jay admitted. "It wasn't like we wanted to hurt Lee."

"Speak for yourself," Kai added under his breath.

Jay decided there had been enough conversation for one night. He tucked a piece of bread into his pocket for a midnight snack, and then he and Kai went to their rooms. The beds were just mats on the floor, but both were tired after the long trip, so they quickly fell asleep.

CRASH!

Jay abruptly sat up in bed. What was that noise? It sounded like the biggest clap of thunder he had ever heard. He could hear villagers outside, all of them sounding frightened and upset. Jay rushed out of the room to see Kai already in the hallway. The two

hurried down the stairs, out the front door, and into the street.

A crowd was gathered in front of Lee's shop—or what used to be Lee's shop. The building had collapsed. As Kai and Jay approached, they heard Din shouting that Lee had been inside.

"I am his wife," a crying woman said to the ninja. "Please help! We must get him out and bring him to a doctor."

The two ninja helped clear away the debris and pulled Lee free. Lee's wife ran to her husband. She talked to him, but then he quickly passed out. He had been hit on the head by a beam and, though still alive, would not wake up. Din, Lu, Kai, and Jay carried him to the doctor's home. After an examination, the doctor said that Lee would be alright, but there was no telling when he would awaken.

"What could have made the building just fall down like that?" wondered Din.

"And what was he doing there in the middle of the night?" asked Jay. "He seemed set on closing up the shop for the night."

"We may not know the answer to your question anytime soon," Kai said to Jay. "But maybe we can solve Din's in the morning."

CHAPTER 2

The next day, Jay, Kai, Din, and Lu went to inspect the remains of Lee's shop. It was no more than a pile of timbers and canvas atop scattered food, rope, tools, and other items. It looked like a **tornado** had hit the place. *Or someone who knows Spinjitzu,* thought Jay.

"Look for anything that might explain why the building fell down," said Din.

"Maybe it was just old," suggested Lu. "I doubt Lee took very good care of the place."

"Could be," agreed Jay. "But it seems kind of odd that it would come down in the middle of the night when Lee just happened to be inside. Still, maybe it was an accident."

"Or maybe it wasn't," said Kai.

The four men began carefully searching the rubble. They pulled out pieces of timber, looked at any nails or rope that had held the building together, and generally checked for anything that looked odd.

It was Lu who made the discovery. "Look at this," he said, pointing to one of the support beams. "It's broken right in the center."

The other three came over. The wood was fractured at just the right spot to bring the beam down. Din leaned forward to examine the break more closely. "That's funny," he said. "This wasn't cut with a saw or any other kind of blade. It looks more like it was **smashed**."

Lu gave Jay and Kai a suspicious look. Then he walked away and started examining the other three support beams. All of them had a fracture in the same place. When

he reached the last one, he bent low to examine something. When he rose, he was holding something between his fingers.

"This was snagged on the wood," said Lu.

Jay, Kai, and Din looked at what he had found. They were pieces of thread, some red and some blue—the same colors as Kai's and Jay's ninja clothing.

Din pulled a dagger from his belt and took a few steps back. "All right, you two, don't make any funny moves. Your ninja tricks won't work here."

"What?!" exclaimed Jay. "You think *we* did this? Look, I'm a lot of things—a ninja, an inventor, a pilot, and an all-around charming fellow—but I don't hurt innocent people. Not even once. And as for my friend, well, he may be a hothead, but he's mostly good."

"Thanks," said Kai. "You're a big help."

"Din, put the dagger away," said Lu. He turned to the two ninja. "I don't think anything, friends. But you have to admit, it looks suspicious. You two argued with him yesterday, and last night someone **breaks four beams** in half and brings the place down on his head . . . someone wearing clothes the same color as yours."

Jay knew Lu was right. It did look bad for them. But if they wasted time arresting the two ninja, the real attacker might get away. He only saw one hope.

"Do you know of Sensei Wu?" Jay asked.

Both men nodded. "Of course," said Lu. "He's a great hero. Who hasn't heard of him and his Spinjitzu, and that constant cup of tea he drinks?"

"Sensei Wu is our teacher. If you honor his name, I ask for a favor," said Jay. "Give us one day to investigate this crime. We promise not to leave the village. At the end of that day, if we haven't found the real attacker, we'll face whatever justice you choose."

Lu and Din looked at each other. Then Lu nodded. "All right. I've heard tales of young

ninja working with Sensei Wu, and maybe you two are some of them. But we'll be watching you—if you try to trick us, things will go very badly for you."

At Jay's request, Din gave him directions to Lee's home. As he and Kai walked away, Kai said, "Good one. Got any idea who did it?"

"Nope."

"Any idea how we'll find out in the next day?"

"Nope."

"Now I remember why I hate traveling with you," said Kai.

CHAPTER 3

Lee's was a small but comfortable place at the edge of the village. A beautiful stand of trees took up half the front yard. Mrs. Lee was working in the garden as Jay and Kai arrived.

"Hello, Mrs. Lee," said Jay.

Mrs. Lee recognized the ninja. "Hello. What brings you here?"

"We're trying to find out who caused this disaster. The evidence seems to say it wasn't an accident. Can we ask you some questions?"

Mrs. Lee invited Jay and Kai to sit on the porch. They followed her there, with Kai

pausing on the way to look more closely at the trees. The trunks were marred, as if someone had been cutting the bark. When they finally sat down with the woman, Jay could tell she had been crying. "What do you want to know?" she asked.

"Why did Mr. Lee go back to the shop that night? It was closed, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Lee. "He said he thought he had left a candle burning and wanted to put it out. When he didn't return, I got worried and went to look for him. That was when I saw . . ." Mrs. Lee fought back tears. "That was when I saw the store collapse."

"Did he often go out in the middle of the night like that?" asked Kai.

Mrs. Lee shook her head. "He didn't used to. But lately he has become very forgetful. He neglects to lock the shop, or he forgets to put the money away, or he can't remember if he has unpacked the goods for the next day. So he has to go back to the shop at night to take care of it."

If heading back to the store has become a habit, thought Kai, *then someone could have been waiting to ambush him. Or maybe he was meeting someone?*

"I suppose he kept the records of everything he bought and sold at the store?" Jay asked.

"No," said Mrs. Lee. "He uses a shed out back as a little office. He keeps the records there."

"We'd like to take a look at them. But first, is there anything else you can tell us about that night?" said Jay.

Mrs. Lee dabbed at her eyes with a cloth. "There is one thing. When I first went over to him, he was still awake, and when he saw me, he whispered one word . . . then he passed out."

"What was the word?"

Mrs. Lee looked right into Jay's eyes. "**'Traitor.'** That was what he said."

CHAPTER 4

With Mrs. Lee's permission, Jay and Kai went into the shed out back. It was filled with dusty boxes crammed full of paper records. Jay wished Zane was here. The Ninja of Ice was much better at making sense of such things than he. Still, Jay was an inventor and he knew that sometimes you had to make do with whatever you had on hand—even if all you had was two tired ninja. He and Kai settled down and began to read.

It didn't take long for them to discover that something wasn't right with Mr. Lee's business. Based on his records, he had a lot more goods coming in than he was selling. Yet he kept buying more and more stuff each month. He should have been out of business by now.

"Why would he buy so many goods if he hadn't sold what he already had?" wondered Jay.

"I don't know," Kai replied. "There's enough here to supply a small army. Unless . . ."

Suddenly, there came the sound of breaking glass. Someone had thrown something through the shed window. To their shock, the ninja saw it was a burning stick. The flames jumped from the stick to one of the piles of paper, which immediately began to catch fire. Soon, the shed was full of smoke as flames spread everywhere.

Jay rushed to the door, but someone had locked it from the outside.

"The window is already blocked by fire," said Kai. "We're trapped!"

Think! Jay said to himself. *Sensei Wu didn't spend all that time training you for it to end this way. There has to be a way out.*

By now, Jay and Kai were surrounded by fire. The shed had no basement, which left only one direction open to them—straight up—and only one way to reach it.

"Spinjitzu!" both ninja said at the same time.

Jay and Kai began to spin, faster and faster, until anyone watching would have seen them as little more than blurs. Where once had stood two ninja, now there were living tornadoes studded with lightning bolts and fire, respectively. Slowly at first, the whirlwinds began to rise from the floor. Then they abruptly shot up, smashing a hole in the shed roof.

Jay and Kai whirled into the open air as tongues of flame and smoke pursued them through the gap in the roof. They veered sharply to the right and dropped, their spins halting abruptly just moments before they slammed into the ground. As Kai lifted his head from the soft earth, he could see a few villagers running toward the shed.

Too late, Kai thought, as he watched the structure burn. *Any evidence is just ashes now. We'll have to solve this mystery some other way.*

Kai helped Jay to his feet. Jay pointed at some of the villagers, saying, "Hey, how come they're running *away* from the fire?"

"Let's find out," said Kai, as he stopped one of the villagers. "What's going on? Why aren't you helping?"

"Haven't you heard?" the villager replied. "Skeleton warriors have been seen in the woods near here. We have to get ready to defend ourselves!"

Before the ninja could get any more information, the man rushed off. A moment later, a short, fat man hurried over to where they stood. "My name is Soon," he said. "I

am the elder of this village. I know you are just visitors here, but I have heard that you serve Sensei Wu. Will you help to protect our village from the skeletons?"

"Of course," said Jay. "We haven't **risked our lives** in at least twelve hours. Just show us where they are."

Soon led the two ninja to where about a dozen men from the village were assembled. The skeletons were in the forest just outside of town, and Jay could see there were a lot of them. They were moving through the woods, parallel to the village's main street. So far they hadn't made any hostile moves, but if they launched a raid, the town's defenders wouldn't stand a chance.

Jay, Kai, and the villagers followed the skeletons as they moved. The enemy paused only once, near the ruins of Lee's store. Then they fell into a loose formation as if they were getting ready to attack.

"What will we do?" said Soon. "Lee gave us about a dozen swords and shields so we could protect the village, but we can't fight so many skeletons. We're doomed!"

"No, we're not. I have an idea," said Jay. "I need some tools, some big metal cans, and a lot of pipe. Can you find that?"

Soon turned to two men. "Hurry and find what the ninja needs."

When the villagers returned, Jay set to work. He punched holes in the cans and fed the ends of the long, thin pipes into them. Then he positioned the cans in trees on either side of where the defenders stood. Each can was about one hundred yards from the group.

"What are you doing?" asked Kai, bewildered.

"Watch and see," Jay said, grinning. "Now I need the men with the loudest voices."

Four men immediately raised their hands.

"Okay, now take the ends of the pipes," Jay continued, "and make as much noise

as you can into them. Yell, shout, bang your swords on your shields, whatever you can think of."

"I don't understand," said Soon. "How does this help us fight off the skeletons?"

"You'll see," Jay said. "Or, rather, you'll hear."

The men did as they were asked, making an enormous ruckus into the ends of the pipes. Instantly, the sounds they were making **boomed** out of the trees. It sounded like there was a whole mob of villagers assembled instead of just a handful.

"That's . . . that's amazing!" exclaimed Soon.

"The sound travels down the pipes and gets amplified by the big cans," Jay said. "By putting the cans on either side of us and a good distance away, it made it seem like there was a big crowd here, all spread out. Look."

The skeletons were moving farther into the woods, away from the village. Whatever they had come for, they evidently weren't prepared to take on the big group of defenders they thought was assembled nearby.

"Wonderful! Thank you very much!" said Soon, slapping Jay on the back. "What can we do to repay you? Just name it."

"Well," said Jay, "how about the answers to some questions?"

CHAPTER 5

Jay and Soon went to sit on a bench and talk. Kai excused himself, saying he was going to find Lu and ask him some questions of his own. Jay noted that Soon seemed uncomfortable, but having skeletons planning a raid on your village will do that. "What do you want to know?"

"You said Lee 'gave' you swords and shields so your men could defend the town," said Jay.

"Not really 'gave,'" Soon said, looking down at the ground. "More like 'sold,' for quite a bit of money. Our whole treasury . . . we're ruined, you see. But it was that or face the skeletons with no weapons but shovels and hammers."

"And he only sold you a dozen swords and shields?" asked Jay.

"That's right."

But he had way more than that, thought Jay. *Swords, shields, armor, he bought all of that, but had no record of selling it. A little went to the village—where did the rest go?*

An unsettling thought struck Jay. "Sir, have you had **skeleton raids** on your village before?"

Soon thought for a moment. "No, I can't say we have. Oh, they've been seen in the woods from time to time, but they've never attacked. We don't have much worth stealing."

"Or anything they *needed* to steal," said Jay.

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"No," said Jay, frowning. "It's not."

"At least the skeletons have gone," said Soon. "That's something."

"Gone? No, they're still out there. They're waiting until dark," said Jay. "That's not what my friend Kai would do—he would **charge** right in, regardless of the opposition. Zane would analyze the situation and maybe take action next week. And Cole would spend the whole night planning for an attack tomorrow. Me? I'd do just what the skeletons are going to do: sneak in. I'm a ninja. We're good at sneaking."

Suddenly, Mrs. Park came running towards the men, waving her arms and shouting. She was followed by Kai and Lu.

"In all my years working at the inn, I have never seen such a thing!" she yelled. "Right in broad daylight, too! And where were the village 'defenders'? Playing in the woods!"

"What happened?" Kai asked Mrs. Park.

"It's Din. He was just returning to the inn when three skeleton warriors grabbed him and dragged him off into the woods. He tried to defend himself, but . . . Well, we found this on the ground."

Lu handed Kai the dagger Din had been holding earlier. He turned it over in his hands, paying particular attention to the blade. As a blacksmith, Kai had seen many swords and daggers before and had a good eye for their shape and quality. "Can I keep this?" he asked.

"Will it help find Din?" asked Lu. He turned to Jay for an answer.

"Oh, he'll be found before tomorrow, don't worry," Jay replied. "I promise, and I always keep my promises. Just ask my friend Cole. Well, no, maybe you better not ask him; I still owe him money. Ask Zane—I never made him any promises, so I haven't broken any."

"Lu, you said there were stories you couldn't share," said Kai. "I think it's time to share them with us."

The tales were about what the ninja

expected to hear—Lee was suspected of being disloyal to the village. A few people reported seeing crates brought into the shop during the night, only to see no sign of them in the morning. The theory was Lee had sold whatever was in them to thieves, perhaps in return for some of their loot. Lu had been robbed several times on the road and lost a great deal of money and goods, and he was certain Lee had profited from his misfortune.

"Why wasn't something done about this?" asked Jay.

"There was no proof," said Lu. "Just suspicion."

Kai turned and walked away with Jay. "I have a suspicion of my own," Kai said quietly. "The skeletons are going to strike again, and we need to make sure they succeed."

CHAPTER 6

Lu, Kai, and Jay headed to Lee's house. Once there, Kai walked over to the trees. He took Din's dagger and seemed to be poking the trunks with it in various places. After a few minutes, he beckoned Lu to come closer.

"See?" Kai said, pointing to the largest of the trees. "I noticed when I was here before that there were all these little Xs carved in the bark of this tree, and a few others. The blade of this dagger is just the right size to have made those marks."

"So you think Din has been attacking Lee's trees?" said Lu. "What for?"

"No, not attacking them," replied Jay. "Right, Kai? He's been using them as a way to contact Lee."

Lu looked up at the setting sun. "The day is almost over. What are you going to do now?"

Kai smiled. "Well, we've talked to you, Mrs. Lee, Mr. Soon, and Din's not available."

"So, naturally, we're going to go talk to the skeletons," said Jay.

After Lu left, Kai took Jay aside. "You handle the spy mission. We both know where the skeletons are heading tonight, so I am going to set up **a little surprise** for them."

Darkness was spreading over the village as Jay slipped into the woods. It was times like these he was really glad not to be his friend Zane. A white ninja robe like he wore made it very hard to be stealthy, unless you were in a snowfield. Dark blue, on the other hand, was made just for the job.

Of course, even with a dark ninja robe, the task was still difficult. Jay couldn't make his appearance known to the skeletons, or he might discourage them from striking that night. That was why he was slipping as quietly as he could from tree to tree, trying to avoid the skeleton warriors. He needed to gather information, not **rack up victories**. Jay just hoped the skeletons liked to talk as much as he did.

He spotted a point of light in the trees up ahead. Drawing closer, Jay could see it was a campfire. Although skeletons did not really feel warmth or cold, they were used to living in the underworld, which was a place of molten lava flows. Fire made them feel more at home.

Jay scrambled farther up a nearby tree as quietly as he could. There were about two dozen skeletons down below, but he didn't see Din anywhere. It was a larger group of warriors than would be needed to raid a

village this size. But a raid wasn't really what they had in mind, or so Jay believed.

Of course, if I'm wrong, the town's in a lot of trouble, the ninja said to himself. *And so are Kai and I.*

He recognized two of the skeletons as Nuckal and Wyplash. They were having a conversation not too far from the tree Jay was hiding in.

"We should have just gone in and taken what we wanted," Wyplash growled. "Who cares how many guys they have in that village? We could have beaten them all."

Nuckal shrugged. "I thought the stuff was supposed to be in the woods? Hey, maybe it was and somebody stole it!"

"Don't be so dense," Wyplash snapped. "Didn't you see that the store fell down?"

"Sure, I did," said Nuckal. "But maybe he was using the crates with our stuff in it to keep the roof up, and when he went to move them, the building fell down."

Wyplash just glared at Nuckal.

"Hey, it could happen," Nuckal finished weakly.

The two skeletons stared out into the dark woods for a while in silence. Then Nuckal said brightly, "Hey, maybe we should have shops in the underworld!"

"Selling what?" asked Wyplash.

"I don't know. Lava boats, maybe, or skull polish . . . I hate it when my skull looks dull and dingy, don't you?"

Wyplash slapped Nuckal hard on the back. "You know, pal, I once heard this song all about how the head bone was connected to the neck bone."

"So?"

Wyplash leaned in close, so he was skull-to-skull with Nuckal. "So if you keep making stupid comments like that, your head bone *won't* be connected to your neck bone much longer. **Got it?**"

Nuckal nodded rapidly.

Jay decided he had heard enough. It was time to head back to the village. He almost started to climb down the tree when he spotted a pair of beady eyes staring right at him. They belonged to a red-tailed crow, a species known for its fierce protection of its territory, and its very loud screech. Jay glanced up. On the limb just above him was a large nest, no doubt belonging to the crow.

"I was just leaving," the ninja whispered. "Don't mind me."

The crow took a step forward on the branch, then another.

Jay glanced downward. Nuckal and Wyplash were still right underneath him. If the crow gave its cry, they'd definitely look up. Sure, they probably wouldn't spot the ninja right away. But a screaming bird might attract enough attention that Jay would have a hard time escaping the camp.

"Nice crow. Good crow," Jay said under his breath. "Sweet, polite crow who isn't going to get me killed."

The crow's beak snapped open, as if it were getting ready to speak. *"Sssshhh!"* Jay said. "You'll wake the neighbors!"

The ninja heard a soft peep from above him. Glancing up, he saw the quizzical face of a baby crow staring down at him from the nest. *This just gets better and better,* thought Jay.

He shifted slightly on the branch. Maybe if he leaped to another limb fast enough, the crow would relax. Jay was just about to jump when he noticed something was in his pocket. Fishing in with his hand, he discovered it was the piece of bread he had taken from dinner the night before.

Smiling, he held the bread out to the mother crow. "See? Here's dinner for you and the kid. And remember, don't talk with your mouth full . . . please."

The crow pecked at the piece of bread. It fell from Jay's hand, tumbling toward the

ground, and finally landed at Nuckal's bony feet. The skeleton bent over and picked it up, then looked up toward the tree.

"Wow," said Nuckal. "Dinner just fell from the sky. I didn't know dinner could do that."

"It can't," said Wyplash, his eyes narrowing. "Could be that someone is in the tree, **spying on us**."

There was a rustle in the branches and a loud screech. An instant later, the mother crow came swooping down at Nuckal. Startled, the skeleton dropped the piece of bread. The bird caught it in her beak and flew back up into the branches.

"Ha! There's your spy," laughed Nuckal. "It's just a hungry crow."

"I guess," Wyplash said. "All right, then, let's get ready. It's almost time to move out."

The two skeletons turned and headed back for the center of the camp. Neither noticed the blue-garbed ninja sneaking away into the night.

CHAPTER 7

Jay found Kai at the ruined shop. "Been busy?" Jay asked.

"As only I can be," replied Kai.

Jay began rummaging through the ruins of Lee's shop for some odds and ends. He eventually wound up with a metal box and an armful of wires, tools, and various pieces of metal.

"What's all that?" asked Kai.

"I'm going to build a gadget," answered Jay. "It will solve the mystery of who attacked Lee once and for all. Should be ready by morning. But we'd better get in position—

the skeletons are on their way."

Jay was right. No sooner had he, Kai, Soon, and the village's defenders gotten to their hiding places than the skeleton raiding party arrived. As the ninja had suspected, they didn't launch an attack on the village. Instead, they headed for the ruined shop. One by one, they uncovered the crates of supplies and carried them back to the woods.

"Shouldn't we stop them? Shouldn't we attack?" asked Soon.

"No," Jay answered. "They are just taking what they paid for, right? We should let them have it."

"But—"

"Trust me," Jay said with a smile. "Have I ever been wrong?"

"Well, no," Soon admitted. "But then I've only known you a few hours."

In less than ten minutes, the skeletons were done and had vanished back into the woods. They left one thing behind: Din, tied up, gagged, and sitting in the middle of the ruins. Jay and Kai untied him and brought him back to where the others were waiting.

"Are you all right?" asked Soon.

Din nodded. "They wanted to know how many men were defending the village, but I refused to answer. Once they saw I wouldn't talk, they let me go. But why aren't you going after them?"

An **explosion** rocked the ground, followed by another and another. "That's why," Kai said, grinning. "One of the crates had blasting powder in it. That didn't seem fair somehow, so . . . I made sure all the crates had some."

"So the skeletons are—?"

"Takes more than that to stop skeletons," Kai answered. "But they probably won't be bothering anyone for a while."

"But we still don't know who tried to hurt Lee," said Soon.

"You will in the morning," Jay assured him. "Just get everyone involved in the case together. My little gadget will take care of the rest."

CHAPTER 8

Just after dawn, Jay and Kai had all of the suspects assembled in the town square. Lu and Din both looked wary, Soon seemed angry and uncomfortable, and Mrs. Park just looked tired. Jay cradled his newly built gadget in his arms and looked at them one by one.

"We only came to this town to buy supplies," he began. "But it turned out the general store business is a dangerous one around here. Mr. Lee is still recovering from having the roof fall in, and we came close

to being jailed for attacking him. Somebody went through a lot of trouble to make it look like we did it, and that wasn't very nice."

"So we started investigating," said Kai. "You, Mrs. Park, almost went broke because of the shoddy goods Lee sold you. And you had access to red and blue string—the stuff you were using to make that scarf you were knitting—so planting the threads would have been easy for you."

Jay turned to Lu. "You lost money, too, but in a different way. You got robbed by bandits, thieves you were convinced Lee had supplied. You'd heard of the sensei, and Spinjitzu, and even his tea . . . which made me wonder if you might have met him once, maybe even been trained by him. If that was the case, you could have brought those beams down."

Kai spoke now, looking directly at Din. "You were in business with Lee, weren't you? When you had some extra goods that could be sold to the skeletons, you left a mark for Lee on one of his trees—a little X. You left one the night he was attacked. That's why he made an excuse to leave the house, so he could go meet you. And that's why his records showed so much more coming in than was being sold. He was selling it to the skeletons. They came last night to collect when they didn't find their crates in the usual spot."

Jay turned to Soon. "Your whole treasury was wiped out by Lee, in return for a measly twelve swords and shields. That was never going to be enough to defend this village—Lee knew it, and you knew it. But he didn't want anyone driving the skeletons away, and you couldn't say no to any offer of help. So you had to pay, no matter how much it hurt."

Kai gave a tight smile. "Four suspects, but only one of you caused the collapse. If we had more time, we could probably find the proof we need, but Jay here promised to

settle this case by this morning. Good thing he's an inventor."

For the first time, everyone paid attention to what Jay was holding. It looked like just a simple metal box with a few wires sticking out here and there. But Jay held it as if it was a golden treasure.

"What is it?" asked Din.

"It's a truth-seeker," said Jay. "I won't bore you with how it works, but it can tell if you're lying or not. To be honest, I already know which of you did this—the clue was in Lee's last word before passing out—but this will give me all the proof I need. So . . . who wants to go first?"

There was a beat of silence. Then Din **broke and ran**. Jay tossed the box to a startled Lu and ran after him.

Din knew the town much better than Jay, and cut between buildings and leaped over fences in an effort to escape. Jay matched him move for move, then suddenly appeared to give up. Din looked over his shoulder to see the ninja stopped in the middle of the road, wiping his brow and breathing hard.

Din smiled. Ninja, he decided, must be overrated. How else to explain one quitting halfway through a chase? The trader cut left and jogged past the ruins of Lee's shop, heading for the woods. Then he staggered and almost fell at the sight of Kai stepping out from behind a tree up ahead.

"Why waste energy chasing you when we already knew where you had to be going?" Kai laughed. "Now we can do this the hard way, or **the harder way**. Either one will end up with you on the ground."

Din raised his hands, ready to fight. "Go ahead. You have no evidence against me. So I ran—how do I know your friend's stupid machine wouldn't give off some strange rays or something? Maybe you just wanted to get

rid of us so you could get away with something *you* did."

Kai faked a punch with his left and then struck with his right hand, but Din blocked it like an expert. "Strange rays . . . that's a good idea . . . I'll have to tell Jay about that one."

Din executed a perfect lotus dragon kick, but Kai was no longer standing where he had been. He had slipped under the kick and emerged behind his opponent. Kai tapped Din on the shoulder, and when Din turned, he used a sweep kick to knock him to the ground.

"You're good," Kai said. "Fast, even. I can see how you brought those beams down. But where did you get the red and blue thread?"

Din sprang to his feet and rained blows on Kai, who parried each one. Then the trader launched a leaping kick from a standing start, surprising Kai and bowling the ninja over.

"So I did some business with the skeletons. Big deal," Din growled. "They're going to win anyway. Do you really think four ninja and an old man can stop an army?"

Kai rolled at Din, crashing into his legs and bringing his foe down. They struggled in a tangle of arms and legs, neither one getting much advantage over the other. "Got it," said Kai. "You were staying at the inn. All you had to do was borrow some thread from Mrs. Park's knitting."

"Would you be quiet about the stupid thread?" Din snarled, pushing Kai off him.

Suddenly, Jay was behind Din, grabbing his ankle and swinging him into a mound of soft earth. "My turn, Kai. Okay, let's talk about something else, then. Mrs. Lee said her husband's last conscious word was 'traitor.' She heard wrong, didn't she? He didn't say 'traitor'—he said 'trader'—meaning you. What happened? You wanted more

money and Lee didn't want to give it to you?"

Din's face changed into a mask of fury. "All right. Lee was a liar and a cheat. He deserved what he got, and more."

"You should have waited until the skeletons got their goods," Jay said, starting to spin. "They weren't too happy with you. How did you talk your way out of their clutches?"

Din tried to stand up, but Jay had him pinned down. "Okay, okay! I told the skeletons they could get their goods, and get rid of you, plus I would give them their next load of supplies for free. So they let me go."

Jay turned into a **Spinjitzu whirlwind**. The force of the tornado lifted Din off the ground and spun him like a leaf in a storm until he was too dizzy to see straight. Then Jay let him drop unceremoniously into a mud puddle.

Park, Soon, and Lu arrived then, with Jay's gadget in tow. They looked at the ninja, now slowing his spinning to a stop, and then at the muddy and defeated Din. Soon and Lu grabbed Din by the arms and hauled him to his feet.

"Don't worry," said Soon. "We'll see that he's jailed for his crimes."

"It's too bad you didn't get to use your truth-seeker," said Lu. "I would have enjoyed seeing how it worked."

"I can show you now," said Jay, smiling. "Kai, would you do the honors? Open it up."

Kai pried the box open. Inside there was nothing but a few colored wires, not connected to anything.

"Wait a minute," said Lu. "That's pretty much an empty box. It couldn't detect lies or anything else."

"Really?" said Jay. "Well, Din didn't know that, so I guess it did its job after all."

A few hours later, the ninja had all the supplies they needed loaded on the mules. It would be a long walk back to camp, but they would have quite a story to tell once

they got there. Still, Jay and Kai agreed that they wouldn't mind at all if the next shopping trip was a little less eventful. Just in case it wasn't, Jay decided to start figuring out how to build a real truth-seeker—you never knew when one might come in handy.

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